

CHURCH HISTORY

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In checking the October, 1965, number of *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, I encountered the following articles: "Unions and Confraternity with Cluny", "A View of Archbishop Lanfranc", "Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London", "Social and Economic Theories and Pastoral Concerns of a Victorian Archbishop", and "The Reactions of Church and Dissent towards the Crimean War." It would be possible for me to point out that as far as I know there has been no article published recently either by evangelical or non-evangelical dealing with piety and charity in late medieval Prague, or with the reactions of church and dissent towards the Boer War. Here we still have open subjects for investigation! But it seems to me that if we are concerned with the current issues in church history we've got to strike a good deal deeper than this. We've got to strike to the level of philosophical presuppositions that operate when one confronts the problems of church history. Specifically I want to discuss four such presuppositional questions.

The first has to do with the nature of history. How do church historians today look at the nature of history? Do they consider historical events as having an objective existence apart from themselves? Do they hold that the events of history have meaning independent of themselves as interpreters? Secondly, I want to ask the question: How does the church historian's approach to the meaning of history in general influence his attitude when he deals with the events of sacred history? What is the bearing of the church historian's philosophical presuppositions on the treatment of the saving events upon which church history presumably centers? Thirdly (and this of course grows out of the first two questions): Is it possible for a Christian philosophy of history to be written? And lastly: What does the church historian have to say to the current confessional issues—particularly those relating to biblical authority—that are troubling many denominations in America today?

There is an article of considerable interest by Will Herberg in the Winter, 1964, issue of *The Christian Scholar*. It is titled, "Five Meanings of the Word 'Historical'." Herberg points out that people operating in the area of church history today frequently do not analyze the way in which they are using the word "history." The word can be used in at least five different ways, and Herberg regards these as a continuum, extending from a subjective existential view of history all the way across to an objective view of history. On the one hand, we have those church historians who look at the past as basically a reflection of the existential stance of the church historian himself. On the other, we find church historians who look at history as having an existence independent of

the historian and who are convinced that historical events give rise to interpretations not dependent upon their own stance.

Now it is important to note that in contemporary church history the vast majority of theoreticians opt for some kind of existential orientation. This is true not only of theologians who are evaluating what church historians do but of the church historians themselves. Among the theologians who have concentrated on this problem we have of course Rudolf Bultmann. Says Bultmann in his Gifford Lectures published under the title, *The Presence of Eternity*: "Always in your present lies the meaning in history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions." Observe: the meaning of history always lies in *your* present. For the church historian, the meaning of history lies in the existential commitment which he himself makes. This may seem pretty radical, but if we take a look at Heinrich Ott, Karl Barth's successor at Basel, and one of the primary figures in the current hermeneutic revival, we see that it is possible to go even farther in an existential direction. Indeed, Ott's position virtually reaches solipsism! Says Ott: "The objective mode of knowledge is entirely inappropriate to historical reality because there are no such things as objectively verifiable facts. . . . All true knowledge of history is finally knowledge by encounter and confrontation" (*Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus und die Ontologie der Geschichte*).

We can see this approach applied to specific historical problems by such theologians of the "New Hermeneutic" as Gerhard Ebeling. Ebeling has spent most of his career interpreting Luther; for Ebeling, Luther supposedly held that we devote ourselves to the service of the "word-event." Luther is presented as an existentialist who dialectically unites the Scripture with the stance of the believer. The French Jesuit theologian Marle expresses amazement that Ebeling has given Luther such "une etonnante actualite"—such a surprising contemporaneity. This is quite so. In fact, when one reads about Luther in Ebeling, Luther sounds just like Ebeling! The church historian Albert C. Outler well illustrates that the professional church historian today feels at home in this dialectic atmosphere. Outler became president of the American Society of Church History a year ago, and delivered his presidential address on the subject, "Theodosius' Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian." The horse threw Theodosius, whose death radically altered the course of Byzantine history and led to the establishment of Chalcedonian christology. In this essay Outler writes: "The frank acknowledgment of this inbuilt uncertainty in all historical knowledge might well be the beginning of historiographical wisdom" (*Church History*, September, 1965). The stress is placed on uncertainty, such as the horse throwing Theodosius.

Now the peculiar thing about this situation is that outside of the realm of church history as influenced especially by contemporary theology, people are seeing that existential historiography is not as attractive an option as it superficially appears to be. Strange to say, clarity has

been achieved especially by those who are approaching historical problems from a secular standpoint. Consider the interesting section at the end of Sherwin-White's 1960-61 Sarum Lectures on *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), where the writer touches on the question of the historical objectivity of the biblical accounts of Jesus' life and ministry: "It is astonishing that while Graeco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the 20th century study of the Gospel narratives, starting from no less promising material, has taken so gloomy a turn in the development of form-criticism that the more advanced exponents of it apparently maintain... that the historical Christ is unknowable and the history of his mission cannot be written." Sherwin-White thereupon compares the historical data in behalf of the Jesus of New Testament with the historical data in behalf of Tiberius Caesar, "the best-known contemporary of Christ." He points out that for Tiberius Caesar we have four basic documents that give us our information, and that even though these documents are hopelessly inconsistent at various points, no one doubts that these documents provide an accurate picture of a historical person and that they can be relied upon for the events of his life and for their interpretation. But in the case of Jesus, New Testament historians seem overwhelmed by uncertainty—and this uncertainty is of course connected with the fact that they have imported their existential judgments into the historical process they are endeavoring to understand.

Recent work in analytical philosophy—for example, Danto's *An Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1965)—has mercilessly exposed the existential presuppositions that underly the commitment of many church historians today. Danto points out that such existential presuppositions are utterly unverifiable. What does it mean, for example, that history is finally "knowledge by encounter and confrontation"? Does it mean that the historian bangs his head against the manuscript? This makes me think of the problem that Robert Benchley had in his college biology course. Benchley thought that he was drawing what appeared on the microscope slide. As it turned out he was drawing a reflection of his own eyelash as this was reflected by the microscope. One also thinks of Schiaparelli's Martian canals which may at least in part have been the product of incipient cataracts in Schiaparelli's eyes reflected against the surface of Mars. The existential involvement of the historian is frequently this sort of thing. J. W. N. Watkins in dealing with this question points out that the analytical work by such philosophers as Ryle "dispels the old presumption... that to understand Ghengis Khan the historian must be someone very like Ghengis Khan." This is a nice point.

And from the theological side one does begin to hear a voice or two raised against the irrationalities built into existential historiography. Pannenberg of Mainz, in his *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, argues that the distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie* as made by the dialectical theologians must go, for it is impossible to take the New Testament at

its face value (or, for that matter, the Old Testament, as Professor Schultz pointed out earlier) if we attempt to separate the events of saving history from the *de facto* events of general history. And one can indeed discover what these events are; it's a matter of examining the documents, refusing to inject one's own existential stance into these documents, and permitting others to check one's investigations so that mutual criticism will uncover presuppositions inimical to objective historical analysis. (Incidentally, for Pannenberg one should look at the second edition of his work [1963], in which he adds an appendix criticizing his critics. His critics have been very nasty to him. Obviously they have overreacted; why? Their own commitment to dialectic presuppositions has been so strong that Pannenberg makes them nervous.) The significance of Pannenberg's position becomes evident when we see that for him (as for the biblical writers) the Resurrection has got to be dealt with as an objective event; it cannot be put into the realm of "suprahistory" or "metahistory." It's got to be considered just as the narratives obviously want it to be considered, as an event on the same historical level as the death of Christ, as the Sermon on the Mount, etc.

With Carl Michalson's recent death in an air crash, Schubert Ogden is probably the most prominent living theological exponent of a radical existential view in the U.S., and even he is trying to stiffen it with Whitehead's process philosophy. You will find an interesting article by Ogden in the January, 1963, *Journal of Religion*, entitled "What Sense Does it Make to Say, 'God Acts in History?'" Ogden has to engage in herculean labor to get it to make any sense, for if you hold with him that God is best understood as the universal process, what is the point of asserting that God "acts" in a special way in history? Paul Van Buren, in his notorious but exceedingly valuable book, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, nicely takes care of Ogden in a long section dealing with the analytical absurdity of the kinds of existential-process statements that Ogden is attempting to make. Neither existentialism nor process philosophy can make theological sense out of history.

What are the implications of this situation for the possibility of writing a Christian philosophy of history? It seems to me that a Christian philosophy of history has got to begin with the assumption that there are objective events which do indeed carry their interpretation with them. This is true not only of the events of biblical history but of the events of history in general. If then we ask, "why do we need the Bible to help us to interpret history?" the answer is that such a welter of historical data exists that we don't know how to relate all the facts to each other. Our lifetime is too short and our perspective is too limited. By way of Scripture we are able to enter to the christological heart of the historical process and thereby understand the operation of other events. We can use the biblical narratives—particularly the narratives concerning our Lord—as a criterion of significance and also a means of comprehending human nature and ethical values, so that we can see meaning in the totality of human life as displayed in history.

Finally, what does church history say to the present confessional situation? Very briefly, I think that you can look at the church history discipline in your seminary or your college with a little more appreciation if you realize that by examining the confessional problem of the last half century one sees a paradigm of the very difficulties that we are encountering evangelically today. If the church historian at your seminary or Christian college were to provide a paper dealing with the history of liberalism in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., for example, that discussion would have a remarkable correspondence to the kind of difficulties that are being faced by a number of other denominations (not excluding stalwart evangelical bodies!) at the present time. The church historian is able to look at the development of theology in the last fifty years and see there the logical interrelation and progress of heresy in the twentieth century. For example, the church historian sees the irony in Barth's horror when his former student Van Buren sent him a precis of his *Secular Meaning of the Gospel*; said Barth in effect, "You have become a heretic"! Why did Van Buren, who took his doctorate under Barth at Basel, pass into death-of-God heresy? Robert Funk, who has posed this problem historically, gives the reason: "Neo-orthodoxy taught that God is never object but always subject, with the result that third generation neo-orthodox theologians have been forced to wrestle with the non-phenomenal character of God" (*Theology Today*, October, 1964). If God cannot be looked at objectively, then God can't be looked at—period. And when the analytical philosophers come along and rightly point out that there is then no verification whatever for Neo-orthodoxy's theological statements, the only possible conclusion is that God has died. His death, however, occurs not in reality but only in the Neo-orthodox dialectic process! He dies in the framework of presuppositions that entered the picture earlier in 20th-century theological development. The church historian can point out that if you jump on a theological train you may not be able to get off at the stop you would like to. The train keeps moving and though you may leap out the window your students will not necessarily do so. They will carry your ideas to their logical conclusion whether you like it or not. In the same connection it's very interesting that Tillich, just before his death, was much offended by the death-of-God people. He couldn't understand why this sort of thing was eclipsing his own theological approach. Yet it's not so difficult to understand. If one makes the kind of existential dialectic commitment that has been characteristic of twentieth century Protestant theology, eventually one arrives at a point where God becomes non-phenomenal and disappears. Let's hope that the church historian can help us to re-evaluate our own position and make sure that we hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints—a faith clearly articulated in an inerrant Scripture and centering on the historical Lord Christ.

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